

The top end of a string of two year-old ewes sold for \$172 a head in the Tuesday sheep sale at Producer's Auction in San Angelo the seventh of June. Closest matching figure of woolie values for all history in the shortgrass country happened the wet year of 1931. Over north of Big Lake, Texas, yellow liver disease killed all except 10 head of ewes guaranteeing a bank loan of 17 or 18 hundred dollars.

The sheep market has been on a steady rise since my liquidation last year. (Liquidation is a better choice of words than dispersal under a limited choice to sell, i.e. raise money to winter cattle.) Planned on buying back into the game if solidmouth ewes dropped below the \$60-dollar mark on my score card. As demand grew and prices rose, I figured if a sleeper arrived at, say, \$120 a head, I could justify spending the cash from the 2004 sale and borrowing the remainder from the bank.

Be good business, using 50 percent my dough and 50 percent the bank's money, or that's the way we have always looked at gambling on livestock. Before all the Harvard Business School malarkey hit the hollowhorn and woolie trade, introducing such mysterious phrases as "cash flow" and "equity financing," banks trusted us. Remember finding

a pencil-written sentence on a ledger full of 1940 livestock loans in the West Texas Wool and Mohair books saying, "Good boy; loan him \$600 to buy a hundred head of sheep."

To calculate the risk, you need to consider the age and flesh of the ewes and the age and condition of the buyer. West of Angelo, you may expect two more lamb crops from a solidmouth ewe without a big death loss or a big feed bill. It would be a long shot, but a broken-mouth guy packing a reasonable body mass and safe blubber mass might work, given all the breaks.

The big hollowhorn journal, the *Cattleman* magazine, just released a poll showing that 60 percent of its subscribers are over 55 years of age. Doesn't sound right, "55 years of age." Over and over, we have heard the ranch community was on a decline that'd make the history of the Lost Tribes of Israel sound like a rebirth of the species.

To check, I need to know the age and occupation of the poll-takers. If the pollsters are my generation, better go over the questionnaires. Been too many of our age group who way back played tic-tac-to and looked out the school house window in arithmetic class to do demography.

I'd be further suspect of a conflict of interest if the tabulators are herders. Out in San Francisco, instead

of using an independent agency, the mayor once ordered the homeless to count their fellow homeless to determine the need for a subsidy. First draft showed the biggest increase in street people in a decade. I'm not sure, but I think His Honor dropped the idea after viewing the results.

The market report didn't disclose the owner or the buyer of the ewes. Be smart to meet the seller in case he or she become interested in sharing or investing the bonanza to support agricultural ventures. No need to meet the buyer, as my whole family history going back to Great Grandfather chronicles acute cases of sheep fever and obsessive woolie-plunging episodes. Too, he or she probably descends from the same madness that's kept a bunch of us cloud-watching herders out here, gazing at the horizon and dreaming of finding artesian wells bubbling crystal water to naturally irrigate rich black soil.

On the Divide, we have grown too much rank grass this spring to run sheep. The lowlands are so lush, turkey gobblers just roll off the roost into the tall grass. Don't bother to lift their wings. Abundant forage cushions the valleys and hillsides and changes the acoustics. Turkeys are mating by sight, as the plush landscape won't carry the echo of the gobbling.

The sad part about quitting sheep ranching is facing how little I learned in all those years. Met a lot of advisers driving trucks and operating scales at grain elevators. Read stacks of pamphlets and news articles on sheep husbandry. Went to conventions and attended workshops. Listened to wool warehousemen and hired wool graders and special shearing machines. However, I never learned to lamb on a dry spring or outwit a cold, wet winter on the bitterweed ranges followed by a summer of heat waves and needlegrass sprinkled among the cactus blooms.

The high-priced ewes keep up hope of a comeback. Somewhere at this writing, doctors holding our fate are testing a cow for the third or fourth time for "Mad Scientist Disease" or BSE. A flicker in a test tube or a dark speck under a microscope will wreck the cow market. Will know then the ratio of exchange between cattle and sheep. The country should be just right for woolies if we have a dry summer and an early frost.